

White-necked Picathartes: how to see one

There seems to be a correlation between the brightness of forest birds and the difficulty of seeing them. White-necked Picathartes takes this to an extreme: surely one of the most sought-after species in the West African forests, yet its silent and ground haunting behaviour makes a chance encounter most unlikely. The only one I have ever seen away from a nest site encountered me, standing in a dry river bed, trying to get to grips with a bird party crossing overhead. The picathartes, the less enthralled of the two of us, sat and preened on a low perch before it hopped away. I spent a month intensively birding the same forest area and never saw another.

Fortunately, these quiet, self-effacing birds stick their unmistakable nests onto dry, overhanging surfaces of obtrusive rocks and in caves, usually two metres or more above the ground and at least a snake's-length away from the nearest vegetation. Such sites are not found on every rock, and even in hilly, rock-strewn forest there seem to be few suitable places. Find one or two and you will get a 'picathartes eye' for a good rock. Searching the sides of steep valleys and inselbergs can then be a productive way to find a place where, at least, a picathartes has been! Nests in use are usually neatly cup-shaped, often the new mud of the repaired rim contrasting with the older foundations. Grass, egg-shells, dead chicks and feathers give reason to suspect you may be at an active site. If you are, remember that the birds may have left silently as you approached and be watching you. Remember, too, that unattended chicks and eggs are vulnerable to avian predation, and that this is a globally threatened species. It is best to work out how you can discreetly approach and watch the site in future, and leave the area altogether for the rest of the day.

Even outside the breeding season, or at a site without apparently active nests, dawn and, especially, the two hours before dusk may be productive - picathartes may be present at sites long before they settle to breed, and may roost at sites even when not breeding.

Finally, in areas with good populations or rocks so dramatic that they are dominant features in the forest, there is a good chance that local hunters will know the species and will be able to take you to a site. They have been indispensable for surveys in some of the areas described in the preceding paper. One such site, in the Kambui Hills of eastern Sierra Leone, provided as near to the perfect picathartes experience as I can imagine. A small, steep-sided stream valley runs through dense forest. By settling against a



White-necked Picathartes *Picathartes gymnocephalus*
By Nik Borrow courtesy of Birdquest Ltd

root on one bank of the stream, you can conceal yourself but have a clear view of a towering, overhanging rock opposite, its base buried in a small sand beach beside the water. The two or three active nests are shadowed in the gloom of the overhang, but incoming birds use the sand, surrounding lianas and low branches to pause before moving to the nests and the

area is an arena for displaying, chasing, preening and loafing. On a good evening early in the breeding season ten birds may be around: rustling enigmatically in the undergrowth or gleaming in the evening sunlight. Beware the birder who gets too enraptured though - according to local tradition the footprints of forest-living dwarfs who can make you lose your bearings in the forest have been seen on the sand-bank.

Picathartes are not getting easier to see. They seem to need rocks with forest - perhaps this explains the paucity of records from the vast but low-lying Liberian forests in contrast to the relatively plentiful records from Sierra Leone. Southern, especially south-eastern Guinea seems to have good possibilities, as do the hill forests of north-west Côte d'Ivoire and the forests of south-west Ghana. Sadly, one of the best known sites, at Lamto in Côte d'Ivoire, has recently been cleared and abandoned by the birds¹. The picture is far from clear, and there is a lot more to find out - if you become one of those who has got to grips with this extraordinary species, make sure your records don't remain buried in your notebook! ☺

1. *Bull. ABC* 1(1):8 (1994)

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